FAITH IS AN ADVENTURE
Genesis 12:1-4 JOhn 5:1-9
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John McCormick Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

There was something to be said for sitting on the porch. It was not terribly unpleasant lying there in the cool shadows [redacted] depending on others to give alms for food. [redacted] The man had his pallet, a flexible mat, on which to rest and sleep: he had the camaraderie of the other cripples and beggars. He had the sympathy of the passers-by who had seen him lying there for thirty eight years. There was something to be said for remaining on the porch - at least that is one of the ways we can interpret the very interesting scenario laid out in the fifth Chapter of John.

Bethzatha, a large double pool approximately 150' x 120' in Jerusalem is the scene. The pool had five porticoes - or porches - surrounding it and it was a very pleasant, placid place. The uniqueness of the pool, however, had to do with the curative powers attributed to its waters. The pool was fed by an intermittent underground spring. When the spring began to flow the surface waters rippled and splashed and turned a rusty color. It was a rather dramatic and mysterious phenomenon and pagan superstition had it that a deity disturbed the waters, and that the first person in the pool during the disturbance would be healed of whatever ailments he happened to have. The Jews, as they did with many Canannite religious customs, preserved the tradition but changed the symbols. An Angel of the Lord disturbed the waters, it was said, and belief in the healing power of the Bool was widely held.

I found it interesting to discover that archeologists have come upon what they believe is the Bethzatha pool in deep excavations beneath Jerusalem's Church of St. Anne. The site has murals of the crippled and depicting

may be

people
lame and inscriptions attributing healing power to the waters of the double pool. And a careful study of Church history reveals the interesting anecdote that as late as the fourth century A.D. pilgrims were making their way to a pool in the city of Jerusalem which was said to have curative power.

In any event, the scene which emerges is one that includes crippled people, critically ill people, having taken up a kind of permanent residence on the porches around the pool. Day after day they sat watching the water, waiting for the disturbance. And when it happened they frantically hobbled or limped or crawled to the edge, hoping to be the first one in. Some had friends or relatives to help them - to carry them when the moment arrived. Some would have had no chance at all: alone, severely disabled, always pushed aside at the last moment, never quite able to make it. So it is that I envision one man who had been there for thirty eight years. The longevity of his residence means that he was among the most severely crippled, and the most hopeless. Someone has calculated that over those years he had made 14,000 attempts to get into the water. And I feel safe in concluding that if he had not yet made it, he was never going to get into the water on time. We want to admire his tenacity, his refusal to give up. But that exercise in sentimentality is interupted rather abruptly by a blunt question from a passing stranger.

"Do you want to be healed?" Jesus of Nazareth, in Jerusalem for a religious observance, walked past the pool, and taking notice of all the sick and lame, came to this man who had settled in permanently. We would expect a kind word, a gentle, sympathetic word, or at least an offer to assist him to the pool. Instead he asked, "Do you want to be healed?"

Now that is a curious question to ask of a man who had invested nearly four decades ~~in waiting and healed~~ sitting, waiting. Of course he wanted to be ~~well~~ healed. Anyone could see that. Or did he? ~~Is the essence of Jesus'~~ Did the inflection in Jesus' voice ~~question,~~ ask, "Do you really ~~want to be healed~~"? underline in copy

I am guessing that the man had long ago given up: that somewhere in the course of thirty eight years he had made a bargain with his fate and that he had settled for the comfort of the porch. I see the possibility at least that the man wasn't really serious; that he sustained the myth that he wanted to be healed by acting out a frantic scramble toward the water. But the fact of the matter was that it had long since become a ritual for him, played for the gallery and perhaps for the sake of his own conscience. He did not, in fact, want to be healed. He did not, in fact, want the status quo for him to be changed. And Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk."

Faith in Jesus Christ is an adventure. It means changing: it means discarding empty rituals. It means getting up and walking. The scene at the pool side is a prototype of what happened time and time again when men encountered Jesus Christ.

If we go back as far as we can, to the dim beginning of the Biblical drama the message is the same: back all the way to the venerable patriarch Abraham. ~~Jews~~ Jews and Christians know him as "Father of the Faith." His credentials? He wasn't a theologian or a scholar. Abraham simply heard the call of God to gather his belongings and his family and pack off into the desert. It meant cutting all ties with familiar and comfortable status quo. It meant making a very difficult decision and then venturing into an unknown future with only God's promise to sustain him. That promise (and how incredible it must have seemed) -

- That there would be a land for him, that his family would be a great nation, was Abraham's salvation - God's gift to him. Actually to pick up and go, to risk the adventure of the unknown, is the primal Biblical definition of faith. Abraham is the "Father of the Faith" not because he believed certain things about God, ~~[illegible]~~ he heard & obeyed, packed up his belongings and moved ~~a considerable risk~~ in response to the call of God.

(1) Or wrote scholarly books or was a saintly man - in fact, he was not that at all - he is Fa. of the Faith because

In the Bible God gives salvation as a gift: He saves his people. In Jesus Christ we believe that God has acted ultimately to give the gift of salvation. Man's response to that divine initiative is faith. It means taking what has been given: seizing, embracing and living the new life that has been given. It implies leaving the old behind, taking risks, and above all else adventure.

It is more than believing or trusting

And yet, we would not ordinarily define the word "faith" in those terms. When we use the idiom "the Christian Faith" we ordinarily refer to a corpus of dogma, the body of beliefs that characterize Christian orthodoxy - the existance of God, the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, etc. To have Christian Faith is to give intellectual assent to the veracity of those assertions. Simply stated, Christian Faith for us is the state of believing, with one's mind, Christian theology. When we say we believe in God, what we ordinarily mean is that we believe that God exists. Likewise to believe in Jesus Christ is to believe that he existed and that he did and said certain things. The Bible, on the other hand, knows nothing ~~little~~ of this basically cerebral definition of religion.

Or, perhaps, we define faith as a vague, confidence that things will turn out alright for is in the future. In any event, we do not

ordinarily, if ever, associate the idea of faith with the idea of adventure. And yet, there it is - in the Bible faith means changing: it means leaving old attitudes, old behavior patterns, sometimes old places behind and striking out into something new. Abraham and the cripple beside the pool had to make a break with the status quo and do something they weren't sure they could do or wanted to do.

I think we know something about how the man beside the pool must have felt. Things may not be as good as we wish; but sometimes the status quo seems preferable to the new, the unknown, the adventuresome. And sometimes we make our little bargains with fate and settle for the comfort of sitting on the porch.

I am reminded of a story my father told and insisted was true, although I don't think it was. It involved a railroad engineer with whom he worked and who ate bologna sandwiches every day of his life. Every day he would complain about the bologna sandwiches, how tired he was of them, how he hated the taste of bologna. One day, the story went, my father asked him why he didn't tell his wife and suggest cheese or peanut butter. And the crusty old engineer told my father to mind his own business - he had been making his own lunch for years.

True or not it's a good story and illustrates the way it is possible to use rituals to hide the truth or to avoid adventure - even in matters so inconsequential as the choice of a new sandwich. That's exactly what the man beside the pool had been doing for thirty eight years; going through a ritual the purpose of which was to protect him from the risks of getting well.

There are of course, a lot of rituals that serve that same kind of purpose. For instance, ("How are you today?" "I'm fine, thank you, and you?") We don't really mean that. We are not really inquiring about the relative state of another person's physical and emotional health. Nor are we accurately reporting how we feel when we respond ("Fine, thank you." In fact, we all know someone who really tells us how they are when we ask: the full story. And we quickly learn not to ~~ask~~ inquire. Because that is not the purpose of the question. It is, that is to say, a slightly dishonest - albeit harmess - ritual.

Not all dishonest rituals are that harmless. They

~~And yet dishonest rituals~~ can actually ~~become~~ be the way we avoid the adventure of growing and becoming. Consider, for instance, our great concerns for the institutions of marriage and family. We are in unanimous agreement that one of the happiest accomplishments in life is to have a strong marriage and a healthy family. We are in equally unamimous agreement that both institutions are under considerable pressure today in a culture that is no longer as supportive of both as it once was. We do an immense amount of worrying about it: we read books, discuss it, study it. And sometimes I wonder if it is not a ritual - a going through the motions of being concerned instead of doing what is necessary. Now, I am in no way questioning the validity of the study and the discussion. But to work at a marital ~~faith~~ relationship - to really try to make a family joyful, life-giving entity involves a certain element of risk and danger. It can be an adventure. (*) It might mean changing some things, such as attitutes, behavior patterns, schedules. It might mean changing comfortable and familiar ideas. But instead of that adventure I think a lot of us settle for the ritual. We may worry and fret and complain, but when

(*) It might mean attending a class or seeking help

all is said and done we prefer the status quo to the potential adventure of growing as men and women.

Or consider the matter of our religious experience. We're commited to the Church, more or less. Yet, when we're honest, we admit that we wish our faith had more meaning, more vitality. And perhaps we are using the rituals of religion to avoid any real adventure of faith.

Charles Schultz incorporates that idea regularly into his Peanuts comic strip. Linus drags his blanket around with him as a source of security: when it is in the washing machine he experiences severe anxiety: when it seems to be lost he is in a ~~mild~~ total panic. Life seems impossible without it. One time Lucy, the eternal protagonist, tells him, ("Linus, you can't depend on that blanket forever. Sooner or later you'll find that out.") And the next picture shows Linus with the blanket over his head extending all the way to the floor.

Well, the comfortable rituals of institutinal religion sometimes serve the same purpose as Linus's blanket. They provide a sense of security: they help us to avoid any adventure of faith. Praying can be an empty ritual when it is confined to the same stylized phrases we have taught ourselves to repeat. The ritual of prayer can be the way we avoid struggling with the idea that there is a God who cares about us and who hears us and who has something to say back to us.

Do we dare to pray honestly: do we care risk exposing our discomfort, and embarrassment? and doubts Do we dare engage in honest Bible study? Or are we content with the rituals of adorning our sanctuary with a copy, giving it as a gift, and listening patiently as the Minister reads the lesson for the day?

The ritual may be easier. The reality

Do we dare take Jesus Christ seriously? ~~To do so~~ means an adventure. It means to grow: to become something more than we are. It means to feel more. It involves becoming sensitive to the hurts of other people: it leads inevitably to a stance of commitment to the welfare of others and involvment in the world where the common welfare is determined.

and do more + love more + give more.

God calls us to that. In Jesus Christ he calls us away from the status quo and to a life-time of adventure.

James Dittes suggests that we ~~have no trouble identifying with the~~ know a great deal about the man beside the pool, the man who spent thirty eight years "on the verge". He suggests that most of us confine ourselves to reading about adventure, that we assume that significant life is out there somewhere, that real things are happening to some people - but not to us.

He suggests that we spend most of our lives on the verge — waiting for significance + vitality + excitement to happen to us.

He writes, "Most difficult and impossible of all is that acceptance of God and that faith in His acceptance that we talk about so much.... We are on the verge of this personal faith constantly, so close to it that we are experts in it. But that we should actually experience it, here and now in this hectic, transitional, mixed-up, humdrum kind of life that we now lead - what could be so fanciful as that idea?! Someday the sense of God's presence and his call will be clear and convincing to us, but not yet" (Minister on the Spot p 5)

Dittes suggests that, like the man by the pool, we are waiting for someone to intercede, someone to help - to pick us up and carry us to the water. We are waiting for "faith" to happen to us.

Jesus heard the man's sad story and said simply, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk" But how? Does that mean that there will be no miraculous interceding in our lives, that we have it in us - to change, to be healed, to grow, to experience Christian faith and full life here and now?

Arthur John Gossip writes, "....looking at Christ, somehow we find that we can do what we have always failed to do, can be what we could never be, can master what has consistantly baffled us, can reach and grip and hold and use what has been utterly beyond us." (Interpreters' Bible Vol. 8, p 540)

But how? ⊕

What it requires of us is openness to adventure, willingness to be more that we are. "Do you want to be healed?" Do you really want to be healed? The how of it all lies somewhere in our response to that question. " Do you want to be healed?" Amen

Father, the status quo is comfortable, and we're not always anxious to experience the risks of a new adventure. And yet, we confess to an emptiness, an incompleteless. Give us the courage to dare: give us the spirit to walk into an unknown future. Help us to hear your Son who keeps insisting that we pick up our bed and walk. Amen

⊕ Jesus came to the man. He took the initiative. He called and the crippled man - to his everlasting credit - had the courage to respond, to take the risk of standing up, unassisted, on his own two feet. In that act - that response of faith - power, healing, courage were given to him. And he became something he never imagined he could become - a well whole man.